

9 July, 2020  
(Extract from arts newsletter)

From  
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NEWS



[V for Victory! Although I'll leave the door open to other interpretations](#)

Pardon the cliché, but what a difference a week makes! The previous newsletter anticipated a long, bitter fight to keep the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo, but on Saturday morning I was amazed to hear that the government had backed down from their “non-negotiable” stance and decided the PHM should stay where it is.

Almost immediately, Treasurer, Dominic Perrottet, and re-instated Arts Minister, Don Harwin, were strolling around the Powerhouse, praising the “passionate” campaigners and museum staff for their efforts in derailing the government’s corrupt, madcap scheme!

In this new, alternative universe the government was tremendously happy with the outcome, which would leave greater Sydney with two world-class venues rather than one. Instead of slugging the tax-payer at least \$2 billion for a completely negative outcome we now learned that the government would generously *forgo* the \$195 million budgeted from the sale of the Ultimo site, and wear the pain of investing another \$400 million to make the Parramatta museum a reality.

Although this was dutifully parroted by the media – where are the hard-bitten investigative reporters – where are the hard-bitten investigative reporters nowadays!! – I’m baffled at how the decision to

massive saving.

When the euphoria had died down, those “passionate” campaigners began to scrutinize the lack of detail in what we had just heard. There is, to date, no guarantee that the heritage properties of Willow Grove and St. George’s Terrace will be preserved. Neither is there any suggestion that the proposed double milk crate on a flood plain will be abandoned or altered in any way. There is still no sight of a coherent museum strategy for NSW, let alone Parramatta, and no commitment to consultation with the community or with anybody who has actual experience of the way museums work. In brief, it appears we may still be looking at a commercial development tricked up to give the vague appearance of a museum.

The dim outlines of a plan have been announced which reframes Ultimo as a “fashion and design” centre while Parramatta becomes the home of science and technology. This would trash the historical identity and uniqueness of the PHM as a museum of applied arts and sciences. It also leaves the door open to moving the heavy objects - the trains, engines, space vehicles, planes, etc – that should not be moved because of their relevance to the existing site, their fragility, and the outlandish expense involved.

Finally if the Ultimo site is to become the home of “fashion and design”, it’s a small step to discover it’s too big for such a task. Then, lo and behold, the idea of selling off part of the site to commercial developers will be revived. After the victory lap it seems there’s still plenty to be worried about. Ironically the government’s stubbornness, secrecy and downright dishonesty has been directly responsible for the creation of the volunteer group, the Powerhouse Museum Alliance, which was able to mobilise massive public anger against a terrible plan. This group of concerned citizens has learnt, the hard way, that our rulers cannot be trusted, and is determined to keep up the scrutiny and the pressure.

The greatest loser in this affair is Premier Gladys Berejiklian, who has sacrificed her standing with PHM campaigners due to her intransigence and cynical indifference. Her change of heart was almost certainly the result of an in-house revolt in which her faction got rolled by that of Dominic Perrottet, who is said to have his eye on the top job. Another contributing factor was a breaking story about the latest, monumental rorts scandal, which saw the government doling out Council grants to Coalition-held seats shortly before the 2019 election.

It may be that Gladys didn’t want to be fighting bushfires on two separate fronts. As a result she was left crying into her beer while Dom and Don strutted their stuff for the cameras. Some campaigners believe it’s important to thank the Premier for the backflip with triple pike on the PHM, but it’s pretty clear she won’t be swayed by positive reinforcement. Gladys backed down because of pressure, not through a sudden rush of enlightenment. Experience has shown this government doesn’t need to be thanked, it needs to be watched.

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